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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000437

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PARIS FOR WALLER; LONDON FOR TSOU

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN COURT SENTENCES DISSIDENT LABWANI TO LIFE
THEN COMMUTES HIS SENTENCE TO 12 YEARS

REF: A. 05 DAMASCUS 5933

[B](#). DAMASCUS 397

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, for reasons 1.4 b/d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. A Syrian Court convicted political detainee Kamal Labwani May 10 and sentenced him to life in prison, then commuting that sentence to 12 years. Such a strict sentence is longest prison term for a political detainee not associated with the Muslim Brotherhood or other Islamic groups since Bashar Asad came to power. The severity of the sentence did not come as a surprise to observers, in the wake of the stiff sentence meted out to fellow political prisoner Anwar al-Bunni. From the regime's perspective Labwani crossed one of their red lines, meeting in late 2005 with U.S. government officials and the Syrian opposition abroad at a time when the SARG faced intense international pressure because of the Mehlis investigation into the assassination of Lebanese PM Hariri. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On May 10, the Damascus Criminal Court convicted imprisoned political reformer Kamal Labwani of "encouraging a foreign power to invade Syria" and sentenced him to life in prison, which was immediately commuted to 12 years in prison. Labwani was originally arrested on November 8, 2005 upon his return from a three month trip to Europe and the United States, during which time he participated in a voluntary International Visitors Program (IVP) along with a Syrian associate. (Note: Labwani had previously headed the now defunct Liberal Democratic Union which was active in trying to create a secular-oriented alternative to the Ba'ath Party in 2004-2005. End Note.) Labwani was initially charged with "slandering the nation in the media," which ostensibly stemmed from an interview Labwani gave on Al-Hurra and on Al-Mustaqil where he called for peaceful, democratic change in Syria. However, many in the opposition felt that the SARG was much more upset by his interactions with senior USG officials (ref A). On April 29, 2006 the government changed tack and brought the capital charge of encouraging a foreign power to invade Syria. It is still unclear why the regime waited five months bring more serious charges against Labwani.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Despite predictions of a very harsh sentence, some observers were surprised by the life sentence (albeit commuted to 12 years). Life-in-prison terms (then commuted to that length) have been traditionally reserved for those found guilty of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood. (Note: Membership in the Muslim Brotherhood is a crime punishable by death under the Syrian penal code but those convicted of the charge traditionally have their sentences commuted to the

same 12 years Labwani received. End Note.) It is also the longest prison sentence for a political dissident since President Bashar Asad assumed power in 2000. (Note: Alawite prisoner of conscience Arif Dalila was sentenced to ten years imprisonment in 2001. End Note.) Observers consider Labwani,s case to be the one that most angered the regime because his meetings with USG officials in Washington (in tandem with subsequent USG statements that included his name) and his meeting with head of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and co-leader of the opposition National Salvation Front, Sadreddin Bayanouni were viewed as brazenly flouting the authority of the regime. Perhaps for these reasons half the benches in the courtroom were removed prior to the trial and there were twice as many security guards as usual. Unlike previous court settings during the trial, guards checked spectators, bags before allowing them into the courtroom.

¶4. (C) The conviction also follows a trend which began with human rights lawyer and civil society activist Anwar al-Bunni,s conviction (ref B) for "spreading false information to weaken the nation." For reasons that are not clear, both Labwani and Bunni were tried and convicted for political crimes in Criminal Court rather than the secretive State Security Court.

¶5. (C) Lawyers for Kamal Labwani commented to assembled diplomats that they would appeal the decision in a month's time but they were not optimistic about a reversal of the decision. Surprisingly, lead defense lawyer Muhannad al-Hassani was not present at the trial. (Note: It is unclear if SARG authorities prevented him from attending the trial.)

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¶6. (C) Labwani,s wife and two of his three children were all present at the trial. All of them expressed sadness at the decision but said the severity of the decision was not wholly unexpected. (Note: In a May 8 meeting with Poloff, Samer Labwani, Kamal,s wife, said that she has quit her job due to the constant harassment she received from Syrian security services at her workplace. In addition, Samer told Poloff that the family has relocated outside of Damascus and family members now spend all their time in Zabadani, 50 kilometers outside of the city. End Note.) Also in attendance were poet and opposition figure Mahmoud Sarem, Joumana Seif, daughter of former MP and political prisoner Riad Seif, Akram al-Bunni brother of recently convicted Anwar al-Bunni and Ali Abdullah, a signatory of the Damascus-Beirut Declaration. (Note: The Damascus-Beirut Declaration is a document that calls for improved ties between Lebanon and Syria. End Note.) In addition to the U.S., there were also representatives from the U.K., French, Swedish, Danish, Greek, Norwegian, Canadian, Bulgarian, and Dutch Embassies.

¶7. (SBU) Comment. Coming on the heels of the Bunni verdict, there can be little doubt that the regime is signaling to both internal opposition and the international community its determination to suppress dissent. Moreover, the 12 year sentence demonstrates the SARG,s desire to warn all political dissidents of the costs of crossing red lines such as meeting U.S. officials abroad or meeting the external Syrian opposition, especially the Muslim Brotherhood.

CORBIN